

SALT

Analysis

Time for SALT held short

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Washington—From the hard evidence available, Henry A. Kissinger's dogged pursuit of new United States-Soviet controls on nuclear weapons reflects his judgment that time is against the U.S.

He is said to be resentful of suggestions that his efforts cloak a desire merely to keep arms control alive through the special political perils of an election year. He is irritated, moreover, at suggestions that his mission to Moscow last week failed.

The secretary of state's judgment on the main issues is by no means universal in Washington. Many critics here are suspicious of the terms that Mr. Kissinger and presumably President Ford might be willing to accept in a new strategic arms limitation (SALT) agreement.

But his position is consistent with his known views on the state of the nation and the world. The elements of his SALT appraisal range from the specifics of the potential agreement, to the decline of national will, to fundamental shifts in the global balance of power.

Little, in fact, is known of the potential agreement. Mr. Kissinger went to Moscow to try to break the negotiating

deadlock over how or whether to count the Soviet Backfire bomber and American cruise missiles—essentially pilotless bombers—in a new SALT agreement.

He came away without an agreement. But he did bring back from Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, a new formula, still vague publicly, for the next SALT package.

According to administration officials, the new formula would reduce by 10 per cent the 2,400 strategic launchers each side would be permitted under the informal accord reached by Mr. Ford and Mr. Brezhnev at Vladivostok 14 months ago.

Such a formula implies solution of the Backfire-cruise missile problem. The most obvious solution would be to restrict both weapons technically in ways to reduce or eliminate their threat as long-range weapons.

Why the Russians would be willing to narrow the numerical advantage permitted by an earlier SALT agreement is not clear, apparently not even to Mr. Kissinger. There is some speculation that Mr. Brezhnev needs an agreement politically and that he might be willing to eliminate old missiles—SS 7's, 8's, and 13's—and obsolescent bombers.

Under existing accords, Moscow controls about 2,550 strategic launchers, the U.S. about 2,100. A reduction of 10 per cent in the Vladivostok ceiling of 2,400 would permit each side 2,160, of which 1,320 could be armed with multiple warheads.

Some U.S. officials believe Mr. Brezhnev would like to consolidate his military forces and to convert more resources to domestic improvement. Another consideration, in this judgment, may be his concern that the Soviet military will become too powerful as his personal power begins to fade and the problem of succession develops.

Whatever Mr. Brezhnev's motives, serious or dilatory, the glacial pace of previous SALT negotiations hardly inspires optimism about a quick solution. Yet Mr. Kissinger is said to have returned with reasonable hope for an agreement by early summer, to be placed then immediately before Congress.

Here the dynamics of an election year enter. No one is certain of public opinion on the issue. The administration knows that any SALT agreement remotely conceivable will be attacked by conservatives as an American sellout, whatever its merits.

The chances that the Senate

might act on a treaty before election day are remote. Still, one administration specialist reports firmly: "Everything I have seen from the President indicates he will proceed if he thinks a treaty can be reached in the national interests."

Whether Mr. Ford's and Mr. Kissinger's perceptions of the national interest will coincide at every point is uncertain. What is clear are the perceptions under which Mr. Kissinger argues for moving as quickly as possible.

They include these ingredients:

- The prospective formula protects most projected American nuclear weapons while providing for a quantitative reduction by the Russians. Apparently the Russians would rely on quality to sustain what they regarded as the essential balance.

- An early agreement is desirable to protect even existing U.S. programs against a suspicious Congress and to avoid fueling pressure for arms expansion in the Soviet Union.

- The U.S. needs to save money on strategic weapons in order to devote more to conventional forces. Mr. Kissinger is known to believe that Moscow, in an expansionist phase, will be flexing its muscles around

the globe. "There will be other Angolas," one source said. The U.S., in this analysis, must be able to respond to the degree permitted by the national will.

- Unnecessary delay will cause grief for Mr. Ford, or his successor if Mr. Ford is defeated, at a difficult time next year.